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ABSTRACT

A study of the attitudes and practices in multinational corporations concerning second language and intercultural skills as criteria for employment of international managers consisted of three elements: (1) a survey of corporations; (2) followup interviews with respondents and with commercial language schools and cross-cultural training consultants; and (3) discussion of the findings' significance with senior management officials in multinational corporations. The survey was mailed to 341 corporations and used, also, in personal interviews with 19 companies experiencing declines or some degree of commercial instability. Responses totaled 89. Respondents indicated and ranked the language-related criteria upon which they rely to choose international managers, including academic qualifications, internships, foreign credentials, proficiency ratings, specialized language instruction, translator certification, and previous business language use experience. Some unexpected findings emerged, and it was concluded that stateside language training or credentials were not viewed with confidence as evidence of useful language skills. The results suggested some further questions to be asked about the improvement of language training, the extent of career options and further training available to entry-level managers, and corporate assessment of language competence. (MSE)

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SO YOU WERE A LANGUAGE MAJOR: CORPORATE INTERVIEWING AND TRAINING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND CROSS-CULTURAL SKILLS

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SO YOU WERE A LANGUAGE MAJOR: CORPORATE INTERVIEWING AND TRAINING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND CROSS-CULTURAL SKILLS

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When we chose to survey American multinationals about their hiring and training of international managers with foreign language skills, we decided to follow up our written questionnaire of January 1988 with personal interviews whenever possible. We had chosen to explore a paradox pointed out by previous surveys - the seeming indifference of these multinationals to implement hiring or training practices to remedy the much-bemoaned lack of foreign-language skills on the part of American managers operating abroad.[1] While the press, politicians and government and education officials demanded a renewed emphasis on foreign-language in the curriculum, it was, with few exceptions, business as usual for the American corporations during the past decade, which continued to insist that English be the language of business. Very often the graduates of our programs in foreign language for international trade find jobs with foreign-based multinationals operating in this country. These companies often have an in-house language and cross-cultural training program to perfect skills in the target language and culture. It seemed to us that previous surveys had adopted one point of view, either corporate or educational, and had assumed that both parties had a common understanding and common goals. We have found just the opposite to be true. Both groups need to work together to design successful programs to prepare future international managers. In our discussions we tried 1) to assess whether or not corporate managers or human

resource development officers were aware of the great strides taken in the university community in the last decade in the implementation of a proficiency-based curriculum for foreign languages, and in the devising of means to measure these skills, and 2) to explore and discuss the complex of factors which has resulted in the somewhat negative attitude uncovered by previous research.

In the late sixties and early seventies the international corporate sector began a serious self evaluation in an effort to determine the profile of a successful international manager.[2] One of the questions often asked was - is foreign language proficiency a prerequisite for success abroad? A stickier problem was just how to implement language or cross-cultural training. This was not a primary concern, of course. But it was a period when language study was languishing after enjoying a brief boom in the Sputnik era. It took the staggering trade deficits of the late seventies and early eighties to underscore the urgency of establishing new training priorities for American multinationals. The foreign language boom of the eighties was born not out of concern for national security, but from a perceived need to regain the competitive edge. Dr. J. David Edwards of the Joint National Committee for Foreign Language best sums it up: "Toyota is the Sputnik of the 80's."[3]

Since we observed that signals sent out by surveys and the financial media were sometimes contradictory, or even misleading, we decided to imitate our colleagues in cultural anthropology. We chose to follow up a mailing to multinationals with as many personal interviews as we could manage. Interviews with commercial language schools and cross-cultural training consultants added another needed perspective. And we felt we could , as our survey progressed, call on previous acquaintances and colleagues in senior

management at the multinationals to discuss the significance of our findings. What follows is an in-progress report on the three activities.

In the initial stages of implementing the survey we sent out 341 surveys by mail to Fortune 500 multinationals. In addition we did 19 in-person interviews armed with the same survey. We chose these 19 companies because we felt that they were bellwether companies. We had read about their international efforts or had had personal contacts with them in the past. A half dozen or so of these firms in the tobacco and petroleum industries had cut back on their hiring of international managers due to decentralization of their operation. We wanted to discuss the negative aspects with these firms in particular.

Our total usable responses were 89 (24.7%), including our 19 initial in-person "surveys." These 89 firms operate abroad in from two to 155 countries around the world. The survey itself was brief (see Appendix A). We felt that a fairly constant profile of an American international manager had emerged in previous surveys: a mature individual with previous international exposure and a substantial number of years with the firm. The most common denominator is generally the MBA. We were interested in pinpointing the training of these individuals, both before and after hiring. Since language for business programs have proliferated over the last decade, we wanted to determine how much of an impact they have had on the larger multinationals. We knew our findings would be somewhat discouraging and we wanted to initiate a long overdue discussion of why this should be so: question number five was a key question for us. Respondents were asked to indicate criteria they rely on to fill such positions:

a. Master's in International Business with applied language training.

b. An internship abroad or with a multinational.

c. Certificate from the relevant Chamber of Commerce indicating that the candidate has passed an exam administered by that body, i.e., Chambre de Commerce de Paris, Madrid Chamber of Commerce, etc.

d. Certified oral proficiency rating.

e. In-house exam and/or interview in the language.

f. Undergraduate language training with specific language-for-business courses.

g. A traditional Ph.D. program in foreign language.

h. A traditional undergraduate major with no applied language courses.

i. Translator's certification.

j. Previous business experience utilizing the language.

k. Other. Please describe.

We had expected an emphatic "no" to "g." However we were surprised to find that not a single respondent checked "c." Academic programs across the country have come to rely on the various Chamber of Commerce proficiency exams. We all anticipated that our improved ability to measure proficiency via these exams and the ACTFL oral proficiency interview had improved our graduates' preparation, and would be so recognized by industry. However, while our respondents were familiar with Berlitz's proficiency exams (both written and oral), they were wholly unaware of the progress made in proficiency testing in academia.

In question number six we asked the participants to list their top five criteria in ranking order. The M.I.B. (a) and previous experience abroad (j) shared first place. An internship abroad was a close third, followed by in-house exams and an undergraduate language and international trade degree.

The follow-up interviews with firms who tested applicants in-house yielded the same negativity prevalent a decade ago. Unless the candidate has had considerable experience abroad it is all too likely that it will be impossible to determine from the resume whether or not this is someone who can really handle the language. The preliminary screening of candidates for positions in international marketing research at the New York City headquarters of a leader in the petroleum industry underscores the seriousness of the problem. Interviewees are handed the morning newspaper in the target language and asked to translate a few paragraphs aloud on sight. Alas, few applicants can do this. This dilemma occurs all too often according to our respondents. This serves to underscore the need to graduate majors with an advanced level of foreign-language proficiency.

Questions number eight through twelve concerning on-the-job training in foreign-language and cross-cultural skills elicited the expected responses. Not one firm managed their own in-house program. They utilized consultants and outside agencies, mainly commercial language schools. Many companies stated a preference for training abroad in the target country. The typical number of hours approaches the equivalent of a one-year college introductory course. 47 per cent of the group mentioned an in-house cross-cultural training program, but only 17.6 per cent have a senior-level person charged with overseeing such a program. A typical program lasts several days, and is handled by an outside training firm.

In talking with individuals at the various multinationals we came to realize that the increased emphasis on cross-cultural training in the last decade owes much of its impetus to something other than the need to compete abroad, namely clashes between different racial, religious and ethnic groups right here in this country.

If we look at our international competitors we find many successful foreign-language and culture training programs to serve us as an inspiration. It is sad to note that our graduates most often receive further training when employed by Japanese, French or German corporations operating in the U.S.

1. How could we improve our courses to employers' expectations?

2. What could our students expect in terms of career options?

3. What are the criteria for hiring? How do our students measure up to these standards?

4. "Measure" is a key word for our profession. How do corporations measure language competency?

5. Could the student expect further training in language and cross cultural skills after employment? If so, what kind?

Other questions were less obvious, but gradually came into focus as we proceeded with our initial mailing.

We'd like to analyze the negative aspects of these responses. Those of us who counsel students considering international careers need to maintain a constant awareness that the eighties are the decade of <u>decentralization</u> in both government and the manufacturing sector. This change in corporate structure means each fairly autonomous overseas unit does its own hiring and training. Americans are brought overseas only if there is a need, which can't be met locally, for someone with high-level technical expertise. This is a last resort since a) the local pay rate would be less and b) strict quotas are imposed on work permits for foreigners. In all likelihood the American chosen to fill such a need will <u>not</u> speak the language and is likely, the

numbers tell us to undergo immersion training at Berlitz, or on site overseas. In the personal interviews, we were repeatedly told that there is a growing tendency to reject stateside training as not effective.

The giants which have not decentralized are in the process of doing so. AT&T and IBM are two recent examples. IBM's case highlights another facet of this complex question: the growing tendency to hire foreign born top executives to work here in the U.S. These managers have an enormous advantage over American senior executives operating abroad. The American expatriate manager usually cannot progress to a top-level post after returning to the U.S. For the European, Asian, etc., experience abroad enhances a career. Many European CEO's have had important assignments abroad. And this already has had a significant impact on our corporate structure. The foreign manager in an American international division must, in turn, hire more foreign senior personnel. This can lead to a morale problem within the corporation.

This influx of non-American managers is about to increase with the exodus of the best and brightest Hong Kong managers to Canada, Australia and the U.S. before the 1997 takeover by mainland China. As we seek to predict the future of our graduates, this becomes the key issue for the next century. We are using foreign nationals to solve our immediate needs. We are also in the business of bringing high technology to the rest of the world by training international students in our graduate programs. What will happen when we no longer have the technological edge, yet rely on others to do our negotiating abroad? If we may be permitted an Iowa metaphor, if in the words of Paul Simon, Americans continue to be 'tongue-tied', they are going to be hog-tied in the twenty-first century.

Survey of Recruitment and Training For Positions Requiring Foreign Language and Cross-Cultural Skills

1. Corporation name and headquarters address:

2. Briefly describe the nature and scope of the business - service, manufacturing, retail, banking, financial services, etc.

3. Is the business a multinational? In which countries does it operate?

4. Do your domestic or international operations require college-trained personnel with ability in a foreign language and/or knowledge of a foreign culture? Please explain. Please continue on back page if you need more room.

5. If you answered yes to question 4, please indicate criteria you rely on to fill these positions. Check ( ) categories which apply:

   a. Master's in International Business with applied language training. _____

   b. An internship abroad or with a multinational. _____

   c. Certificate from the relevant Chamber of Commerce indicating that the candidate has passed an exam administered by that body, i.e., Chambre de Commerce de Paris, Madrid Chamber of Commerce, etc. _____

   d. Certified oral proficiency rating. _____

   e. In-house exam and/or interview in the language. _____

   f. Undergraduate language training with specific language-for-business courses. _____

   g. A traditional Ph.D. program in foreign language. _____

   h. A traditional undergraduate major with no applied language courses. _____

i. Translator's certification. _____

j. Previous business experience utilizing the language. _____

k. Other. Please describe. _____

6. Please indicate which of the above criteria are most important in ranked order - 5 equals most important.

5 _____
4 _____
3 _____
2 _____
1 _____

7. Please indicate which of the criteria have not been reliable. Explain why.

8. Do you train employees in foreign language skills after they are hired? Yes No

9. If you answered yes to 8 please indicate whether language training is

a. In-house

b. Done in-house by an outside agency, i.e., language school or university.

c. Handled outside mainly by a language school or university.

d. Furnished on an individual basis with a variety of sources utilized.

10. If your company has a regular training program as outlined above, please describe it. Continue on back or on a separate sheet.

11. Do you have a regular cross-cultural training program? Yes_____ No_____

If yes, please describe.

12. Does the company have an individual charged with facilitating cross-cultural relations within the organization. Yes_____ No_____

If yes, please describe.

13. May we use your company name and quote your answers in our report? Yes_____ No_____

_____
Signature

_____
Position

14. Would you be willing to participate in a further interview? No _____

Yes, I can be contacted at:

Other company contacts?

NOTES

[1] There are only a handful of studies initiated by foreign language educators. These are sometimes local in scope. For a broader treatment see John R. Hubbard and Robert Ristau, "A Survey of Bilingual Employment Opportunities in International Trade," Foreign Language Annals, 16 (1982), 115-121, and Marianne Inman, "Language and Cross Cultural Training in American Multinational Corporations," The Modern Language Journal, 69 (1985), 247-254.

[2] A sampling of the literature has been included in the Bibliography. Journals mentioned there include articles on international management on a regular basis.

[3] Quoted by Larry Rohter, "Why Foreign Languages Are Relevant Again," The New York Times, Section 12 (4 January, 1987), 33-36.

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